



Pointmaker

“IN BLOOD STEPP’D IN TOO FAR”?

TOWARDS A REALISTIC POLICY FOR AFGHANISTAN

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SUMMARY

- Afghanistan is just one area of confrontation in our wider struggle against political Islam, a struggle which we must win.
- Afghanistan is no more important to Al Qaeda than half a dozen other countries. But it is strategically useful for AQ in generating propaganda footage of “infidels” fighting Muslims, and Muslims fighting back.
- NATO’s ill-conceived, largely military operation in Afghanistan is on the brink of failure. Support for NATO forces is falling: only 45% of polled Afghans support a NATO presence in the South, down from 83% in the previous year.
- Much of what NATO is doing is aggravating the problem and is making attacks on the UK and other NATO countries more likely, not less.
- It is vital that Afghan territory is not used as a launch pad for future attacks; and that the Islamist minority cannot claim victory.
- “The Taliban” are mainly ordinary local farmers. External fighters and ideologues are a smaller but growing part.
- Attempts to impose central government on a country with hundreds of deeply divided and independent communities are over-ambitious and likely to fail; as is the establishment of strong National Security Forces.
- There is no perfect answer. Afghanistan can be stabilised if a reasonably honest government is established; if tribal structures are supported; if we deal with those who we are not prepared to deal with today; if the regional tensions between India and Pakistan are addressed; and if a spirit of reconciliation is fostered.
- This can be achieved with a much smaller allied force. There is always going to be some level of insurgency in Afghanistan.
- These objectives are, given political will and realism, achievable. And they would bring a great saving of British lives and money.
- It is time to ask whether the official cross-party consensus is failing our soldiers and making our country less safe.

INTRODUCTION

“We are liable to meet with more opposition in the attempt to disturb what we find existing than from the exercise of our physical force.” –

Colonel Claude Wade, 1839

The Allies' strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, since the removal of the Afghan Taliban and the ejection of Al Qaeda, has made a bad situation worse. It has also been a major contributor to radicalisation in the Muslim world. Our main aim should now be to isolate those who would commit mass murder by addressing the causes of radicalisation. This is the only way to defeat AQ and its franchises.

In Afghanistan, soldiers and tribesmen have been dying in large numbers. Unknown numbers of enemies have been recruited to AQ directly because of a flawed and over-ambitious strategy, which works against the grain of Afghan society. We have been told that this is in our vital national interest in order to stop Afghanistan once again becoming an ungoverned space from which another 9/11 could be launched. The truth is that the country has become less governable. What has been happening is making the launching of 9/11s from elsewhere more likely.

At a time when we should be reducing our visibility in the region, we are talking about increasing troop numbers. The US policy review continues to make the mistake of believing that counter-insurgency and top-down nation-building are two sides of the same coin. It restates a strategy that has led to conflict with age-old tribal structures as well as the Taliban. Overly confident, we have misread the reasons for the success of the surge in Iraq, and are now set to move deeper into Afghanistan, seemingly determined to do much better what we have already tried and failed to achieve.

AQ, not the Afghan Taliban, was responsible for 9/11. We achieved our primary objective back in 2001 when we drove AQ out of Afghanistan (into Pakistan). We then refocused on Iraq and allowed a narco-economy to fill the resulting power vacuum. Since 2006, when NATO arrived, in force our “strategy” has resulted in the growth of a popular uprising in the Pashtun south and east of the country. “Taliban” has become a label for every type of armed opposition, of which ideologues of the old regime are just one small part. As well as fighting a newly emboldened ideological Taliban and foreign jihadis, we have mainly been fighting the sons of local farmers. No one challenges the assertion that around 80% of Taliban dead die within 20 miles of where they live.

Sooner or later events will force us to be more realistic: better to set the conditions ourselves now by having an honest look at where we are than to have them dictated to us when we end up in an even worse place.

We need to be smaller, smarter, less physically obvious and more flexible in the way we think of Afghan governance, in order to undermine the Taliban's operating system. We need to separate disparate local Taliban groups, militias and networks from the external leadership.

This is not to suggest withdrawal, but a more modest aspiration that might have some chance, even now, of stabilising the country, of reducing tension in Pakistan, of reducing this cause of radicalisation, and allowing us to undo the damage of recent years. To win what was called “The War on Terror”, the West now needs to decide whether or not it wants to reinforce failure, or to win. This is the moment to try to settle things down after a disastrous opening.

TIME TO CHANGE, TO REBALANCE

“Throughout the approaching operations, the British influence will be sedulously employed to further every measure of general benefit, to reconcile differences, to secure oblivion of injuries, and put an end to the distractions, by which, for many years, the welfare and the happiness of the Afghans have been impaired”

The Simla Manifesto, 1838

It is a false dichotomy to say that we must continue as we are, or we just leave the place to revert to the dark ages. There is an alternative between these extreme positions. We can still prevent AQ returning as a threat to us out of Afghanistan without the deployment of tens of thousands of troops and the loss of hundreds of lives and billions of dollars. To achieve that, we need to have two clear policy aims.

- First, to maintain wide-ranging capabilities to find, fix and strike anyone presenting an international threat.
- Second, to ensure that NATO's rebalancing can not be painted as victory for the Islamists. We can not cut and run but must continue to support some sort of loose national government and make deals with locals in the Pashtun belt.

Since the ejection of the Taliban in 2001 this has not been a war of necessity, even if some people continue to say it is to justify the sacrifices made by our troops and their families. Neither President Obama nor Prime Minister Brown would now make the same decisions that others made for them. We are not trapped like Macbeth “in blood stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er”. Witness the President's reluctance to reinforce the mission until convinced that there was some sort of

workable strategy. Some called this paralysis on the part of the President; it may just be that General McChrystal reported a far worse situation than is being made public – and that the President needed time to think.

A strong centralised state is unrealistic for a country with thousands of independent communities mostly living in extreme poverty – one which has never been a single nation. It is wildly over-ambitious to talk of the creation of a “democracy and a strong Afghan state”. It is better to think of a state with widely ranging levels of federation, one that is far more likely to take the sting out of the insurgency.

THE TALIBAN

The Taliban is not responsible for 9/11. Many people conjure up images of Bin Laden and the one eyed-Mullah sitting around sketching burning towers and the Statue of Liberty. In fact these Arabs were wealthy co-religionists whom the Taliban allowed to set up camps in their country.

That is a very different thing from being co-conspirators on 9/11. Even before the attacks, many in the Taliban were uneasy about the behaviour of the Arabs. In the late 1990s Taliban leader Mullah Omar asked Bin Laden to move AQ's headquarters from Jalalabad to Kandahar so that Omar could keep his remaining eye on him. Mullah Omar gave the most serious consideration to handing Bin Laden over to Prince Turki, the then Saudi intelligence chief, when he landed his jet at Kandahar airport to take Bin Laden prisoner. Many of the Ulama – the 70 or so most senior clerics – were in favour of handing him over. It was only after a hurried shura that the Taliban decided that the honour code of *Pashtunwali* – looking after your guest – should take precedence, but, apparently, it was a close run thing. The routing of the Taliban thereafter is

history. Before their ejection from power they never presented a threat to the West.

Al Qaeda and the Taliban are different

The two are fundamentally different in their strategic goals, though over the last four years they have become closer in an ever-stronger marriage of convenience. The targeting of Taliban leadership by NATO Special Forces has also meant that hard-liners have replaced many dead leaders – which again, drives AQ and some Taliban commanders closer together.

AQ is an internationalist nihilist group, intent on global jihad to usher in the Caliphate. The Taliban is a national movement, with limited national aims – however unappealing to us in the West or to their own people. Today they would probably settle for controlling Kandahar and the Pashtun belt, but that is extremely unlikely to happen in the future. Many in Afghanistan welcomed the Taliban after decades of insecurity and war. Some aid agencies today maintain that development was easier when the Taliban controlled the country than it is to conduct today.

While the Taliban's behaviour to their own people was in many ways monstrous, they never threw so much as a petrol bomb in the West. Remember that 9/11 was planned in Germany, over the internet, and at flying schools in the US, and was largely committed by Saudis.

The Taliban are part of Afghanistan

It is a mistake to talk of the Taliban as if they are no part of Afghan society, as if they are somehow "other" (even the likes of President Karzai has more in common with the Taliban mindset than we care to admit: he did not seem to have too many qualms when he passed a law for the Hazara Shiites, allowing husbands to starve their wives if they refused sex.)

It is also a mistake to think of them as an organised mass movement. Originally supported by the Pakistani Directorate of Inter-services Intelligence (ISI), what started as a small group of religious "students", unexpectedly won mass support. They grew because they met the needs of the population at the time, weary of civil war and desperate for order and security.

In a sense the same thing has happened over the last four years as security in the country has worsened. When the Taliban were deposed, most people were delighted to see the back of them, or just removed their own black turban and put it away. Today local commanders will gravitate to the side they think will win – and the absence of security, the failure to generate economic activity, and the presence of large numbers of foreign troops has generated some resurgence in support from ordinary people. The overwhelming majority of our opponents are in it for the honour of fighting the foreigners who just came into their neighbourhood. Most aren't paid anything.

"Taliban" – a label

The Taliban is not a single group. It is just a label for hundreds of different armed bands. Fighting NATO is what unites them, not ideology. Most are ordinary local people. But their enemies' enemy is their friend, so into the mix you can find many Pakistani Pashtuns and foreign Jihadis in the large "flying columns" that range across the south, organising and energising village militias. (According to the head of the Afghan intelligence service, "probably dozens of British Muslims" of Pakistani ancestry have fought in the country over the last four years).

A large proportion of the Afghan population remains deeply traditional and resistant to change. Important aspirations (for the West), like women's rights, will have to wait until the reality on the ground catches up. There is a huge difference between traditional, deeply religious

local people who fight against an invader (whether British, Russian or American) – and AQ.

AL QAEDA HAS LEFT

We are told it is critical that we deny Afghanistan's territory to AQ. This makes no sense. When US and British Special Forces, the US Air Force and the Northern Alliance – not to mention the Afghan people themselves – removed the Taliban, very few AQ members fled in the caves of Tora Bora: those in the south melted away into the tribal areas of Pakistan and beyond. Important AQ leaders in the north were flown out by the Pakistanis when they evacuated their ISI officers from Kunduz airstrip in late November 2001 – flights that had been authorised by the US, ignorant of who ISI agents would allow to board, flights that were carrying precisely the sort of people that the US Operation Enduring Freedom was hunting down.

Today AQ is in at least a dozen countries – who needs Afghanistan when you can use tribal Yemen or devastated Somalia, or be protected in Pakistan and the permissive environment of its tribal areas, or stay in the 'Stans of central Asia, or while away the afternoon in an internet café in Leeds? NATO talks about Afghanistan as key terrain against AQ, but there is just as strong a case for taking on Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia or Leeds.

Better to fight them there than here?

“Our commitment is first and foremost about Britain's national security interest.

Put starkly, the choice is between fighting the AQ insurgents in Afghanistan, and fighting them on the streets of UK towns”

Britain's Ministry of Defence, 2009

This statement from the MoD is nonsense. Put starkly, our current situation is working against the West's security interest and is making attacks on the streets of Britain more, not less, likely. We

are told that if we are not in Afghanistan, the country will once again become an ungoverned space from which our enemies can attack us. But there are other failed states in the world where extremists are organising against us.

AQ's Strategic Information Asset

AQ needs NATO in Afghanistan – more now when Western troops are out of Iraq. Before 2006 who had heard of Musa Qala, Sangin or Kajaki? Today they are rallying cries across the websites of Global Jihad. Places like Helmand are, for AQ, a gigantic film studio. For them, Afghanistan is the best place in the world to generate video footage of “Mujahadeen” attacks on “Infidel Forces”, which in turn supports both fundraising and recruiting. AQ needs pictures of “heroic martyrdom operations” and mutilated children.

Long before 9/11, Bin Laden was arguing that the West wanted to occupy Muslim countries and kill Muslims. In the eyes of some Muslims, AQ's predictions have come true. When they looked at our conduct in Iraq and Afghanistan, they saw the application of one standard of treatment for the “infidel”, and quite another for Muslims. Bin Laden has, to them, gained credibility by his violence; and we have added credibility to his message.

RECONCILIATION AND DEAL MAKING

“I think we all acknowledge that our policy should be to make peace with the tribes”

Major Fitzgerald Wintour, 1898

The hard-core Taliban's operating system can be undermined. So far our actions in Helmand have fuelled insurgency because we have concentrated on war-fighting, while only paying lip service to improving the lot of the people, or understanding local political realities. Would we not do better to partner with the people to attack the real enemy? If we can do this, we are more likely to see willingness on the part of

higher commanders to make deals. The problem now is that they sense a wobbling of resolve from our capital cities, and feel that they are winning the fight in the Afghan countryside.

Drinking tea can greatly reduce violence

One remarkable individual told me that a decent political officer, with the right support, a generous budget and plenty of time to drink tea with commanders and tribal elders, could reduce the violence in Helmand by up to 70%. This is no vainglorious speculation: that sort of approach has worked before, when the British Empire had dedicated Political Officers in the region. It can work again – if there is the political will behind it.

Until recently the Americans opposed deal-making except at the very lowest levels. Happy with the idea of leaning on Taliban foot soldiers to cross over to the US side, there are few options for the commanders. But only part of the insurgency is genuinely loyal to the original Taliban movement.

The argument of the Expert Tea Drinker runs like this: it is a lot cheaper to make peace with the foot soldiers and commanders of your enemy than to fight them. Reconciliation is not alien to Afghanistan; battles have often been decided less by fighting than by defections – but that means that you have to understand the important underlying motivations and interests of Taliban leaders and their followers.

Unfortunately, the early US efforts were counter-productive, giving the impression that surrendering insurgents would be imprisoned. For example, Abdul Haq Wasiq, Taliban deputy minister of intelligence, and Rahmatullah Sangaryar, a commander from Uruzgan, sought government protection, but found themselves shipped off to Guantanamo Bay. This is a serious problem for future reconciliation.

In late September and early October 2009 Saudi Arabia, in co-operation with the Afghan Government, gathered some Afghans close to the Taliban to a talks process. According to an Afghan who lives in London who was present on the peripheries, it did not get very far because the ideological Taliban saw no need to make a deal as they felt they were winning, both militarily and with the ordinary people; and because the representatives of other groups did not feel that the representative sent by President Karzai was sufficiently powerful. So the window of opportunity may be closing.

Since the Taliban is not a unified movement, those who see their interest in sustaining a permanent conflict, will always try to sabotage any centrally organized process. Reconciliation is more likely to succeed as an incremental process aimed at many different factions. The key thing is that it will be vital to engage with them at the same time, to prevent any one leader being turned upon.

Efforts must focus on the particular characteristics and wants of each insurgent – their tribal links, traditions and the special conditions under which they function. Negotiators with credibility in the Kabul Government and ties to insurgent networks are critical to this.

“Good patriotic Taliban” and “bad Taliban”

Publicly, the political message is important. Those who reconcile should be portrayed as patriotic and truly devoted to the cause of Islam and an independent Afghanistan. A distinction should be made between the “good patriotic Taliban” and the “bad Taliban”. Reconciliation must also focus on real needs: substitutes must be provided for what the insurgent groups offer: comradeship, security, a livelihood and respectability. These “patriotic” Taliban must be allowed to claim much of the success in local areas for reducing the

presence of international forces and the establishment of order.

To satisfy coalition politics, Taliban leaders must be persuaded that the quickest way to get the foreigners out is to demonstrate they have broken with AQ and that any territory they control will not be a haven for terrorist groups.

The safe haven that the Taliban carved out in Pakistan is an impediment. Because many commanders based there feel physically safe from attack, they have little personal incentive to engage politically. But there may be a way to turn this problem into an opportunity.

For example, Washington could help coordinate a low profile but intensive dialogue between internationally-backed (including Arab) mediators and networks of commanders in Pakistan. As a precursor to this, the Pakistani Government's backing, or at the least agreement, not to disrupt this process should be secured by the US. There can be no reconciliation in Afghanistan without progress in Pakistan – which means involving India as well.

PAKISTAN

The holy grail for dealing with the Pashtuns is the reduction in visibility of NATO forces. They are a direct provocation in Afghan Pashtun areas. If we can ever shift to this stance, it will help take the heat out of the insurgency in Pakistani territory. There would then be a limit to the extent to which Pakistani Waziri tribesmen or Lashkar Taiba Punjabis can rest their claim to legitimacy on butchering unfortunate policemen or aid workers in Afghanistan.

The insurgencies on both sides of the border are linked. There now seems to be a decisive mood swing against local militancy in Pakistan, with tribesmen even in Waziristan waiting to see if the Government is serious about

restoring its writ. The role of "S Wing" of the ISI again has the capacity to upset the applecart. Even while the country reels in horror at local Taliban attacks in the Punjab and North West Frontier Province, the ISI persists in backing the Haqani network. It is as if they cannot bring themselves to acknowledge the links between the ISI's preferred Afghan partner and organized crime throughout Pakistan; and between the Haqanis and the jihadi groups responsible for the horrors in Pakistan's cities.

The heart of "the Establishment"

Pakistanis talk in terms of "the Establishment" as an almost invisible hard core of army officers and bureaucrats who set themselves up as the custodians of the country's national security. Last year, I drank beer with a General who fairly recently had been in charge of ISI. In the Establishment's worldview Afghanistan presents two big threats to Pakistan's national security and integrity.

It is all about India...

The biggest is the fear that a pro-Indian Government in Afghanistan could open a second front in any future war with India. Pakistanis see the country through the prism of Kashmir and conflict with India. The key to the problem is far away – on the line of control that divides Kashmir. Establishment fears of undue Indian influence have also been fuelled by India's reopening of its consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar and by the activities of the Indian Border Works organization in implementing infrastructure contracts in Afghan provinces close to the Pakistani border. Only the US could bring the sort of pressure needed on India, and long-term reassurance to Pakistan.

... and the Durand Line

Establishment worries also go back to 1947 and the partition of British India, when many in Afghanistan believed that the Pashtun lands of what is now Pakistan's Federally Administered

Tribal Areas should have gone to Afghanistan. President Karzai – also tainted with a spell at university in India – has made it obvious that he belongs to that school in Afghan Pashtun politics which will not recognise the Durand Line (which Pakistan insists is a *de jure* international border between the two countries). He sporadically hints that they want not just the tribal areas but recovery of the lost Afghan city of Peshawar and a corridor to the sea.

The tradition of grand visions on both sides means that Pakistan's Establishment and the Afghan hyper-nationalists always suspect each other of supporting proxies in the tribal areas and Afghanistan's border provinces. In a strange sort of way, the two local sides have tried to use the Russians and Americans as their proxies in this endless game. The tail wags the dog.

Afghanistan and Pakistan: the hidden war

They don't much like discussing it with outsiders, but, in some ways, the last 30 or more years of conflict can be seen as an Afghan/Pakistan war, with the Russians and now the Americans as bit players. The US and UK now refer to the problem as "Af/Pak" – but have our efforts demonstrated that we understand this point?

The Establishment's ideal would be a Government in Kabul which is well-disposed towards Pakistan. If they can't have that, then an incompetent Taliban Government might be a least bad option. If this is unattainable they would prefer an ungoverned Afghanistan to one dominated by India.

The ISI believes that NATO forces will leave Afghanistan soon. At that point they feel they must be in a position to take over. Unless the international community can address this issue it is unlikely that Pakistan's support for the

Taliban will cease to make sense for them. The Establishment will continue to support the Taliban no matter what Oxbridge educated politicians in Islamabad promise us, or however much we try to influence them – their central tenet is that Pakistan must have "strategic depth" to protect itself against what it sees as a constant existential threat from India.

Despite the Taliban's religious fundamentalism and Pashtun cultural origins, the ISI maintains a substantial stake in the movement. Without support bases in Peshawar and Quetta and more remote areas, the Taliban would look much more like a series of dispersed localised rebellions. There would still be an insurgency, but it would be containable and manageable by an Afghan Government with help from us and the Pakistanis. The Indians seem to cope with some 60 long-running and semi-permanent local insurgencies; we can and must reduce the Pashtun uprising to this order. This is huge, but it is more do-able than building Surrey, or even Bangladesh, in places like Helmand. So forget nation building. Try fixing existing ones first.

ON THE BRINK OF FAILURE

Since the arrival of NATO in force in 2006, the situation in the country has deteriorated markedly. With the exception of some US activity in local areas of the east, neither security nor any sort of meaningful reconstruction has reached the Pashtun south and east of the country – while the Government we finance is dominated by the minority ethnicities of the Northern Alliance.

If you are a poor farmer in Helmand you could be forgiven for thinking that your lot had got worse since western troops arrived. High levels of violence and a failure to develop markets for legitimate crops are not a success story. One example of the tragic failure of the international community to address the needs of ordinary people can be found in the

oranges used to make juice within NATO's Kandahar air base: they come from Saudi Arabia, and yet farmers around the city produce some of the best oranges in the world. Kandahar's main fruit canning factory is now in use as the Canadian Army HQ.

Much has been made of our plan for a 'Comprehensive Approach'. The military supposedly provides a sort of umbrella of security under which development and local political initiatives separate and protect the population from the insurgents.

In 2006, I travelled to the provincial capital of Helmand. The Paras and others of 16 Air Assault Brigade had not yet arrived. I was surprised to hear from notoriously xenophobic Afghans that they wanted foreign troops there to provide security against the Taliban. They understood that the world's interest afforded a multi-billion dollar opportunity to emerge from the Middle Ages after 30 years of war. "If the British bring security and reconstruction, they are welcome here. But if they don't bring them, then they should leave." Soon after the arrival of our brigade a month or so later, we mistook a drugs turf war for a resurgent Taliban, and fixed our magnificent troops in lonely outposts – thereby effectively tearing up the original plan which was to create and slowly expand "ink spots" of security, development and governance.

A year later, after high levels of violence, I returned, and sat rather more nervously with a group of young Afghans: the message was a bit different: "The British tell us that we have security and reconstruction – but where is it? They should show us, not always just tell us."

The local population is well on its way to turning their support from NATO forces: 45% of polled Afghans support a NATO presence in the South, down from 83% in the previous year. No wonder the Government stopped showing

the Defence Select Committee the results of this classified polling.

The 'Comprehensive Approach' is looking more like a comprehensive failure in Helmand. We have barely begun to understand local politics, and the remarkable efforts of one of our government agencies to reintegrate local Taliban floundered because of the inept and unpopular central government. The Police appear corrupt and violent: there have even been gun battles with British troops in the streets of Lashkahr. Locals would rather go to the Taliban to settle land disputes than to the Government. While they may intensively dislike the Taliban, they believe that their decisions are more likely to be predictable and fair. In 2007, at least one opinion poll showed that confidence in the government to provide security had decreased by 20 points, whilst confidence in the Taliban to provide security has increased by 19 points.

Department for International Development

One would expect, given the level of insurgency in Helmand, that it would receive significant support and funding. But according to NATO's 2007 figures, Helmand is second to last. This is mainly because DfID has operated a system that pushed 80% of the money into Kabul government ministries, most of which are tainted by accusations of corruption. The British civilian effort in Helmand just can't find ways to spend it, and in any event are bound by "duty of care" rules that prevent all but the most basic movement by their staff.

Nothing that we do matters very much unless the ordinary Afghan feels our presence has made a positive difference to his or her life. "Is it true that Britain has spent \$1.6 billion on war here?" said one, "Imagine what that would have done if they had given this to the people here for reconstruction." Tribesmen in Helmand cannot understand why this has not happened.

As currently configured, DfID is just the wrong organization for the job. What have we delivered that an ordinary farmer can actually touch?

NATO – a chaotic bureaucracy

“We Can Not Fail in Afghanistan” because that failure would seriously damage the alliance’s deterrence capability and would raise question marks over its cohesion.

That is what they say anyway. But NATO has shown itself to be less an alliance of equals fighting against a mortal common enemy, than a chaotic bureaucracy made up of self-interested nations. Many are in Afghanistan as a political trade-off with the US for not going to Iraq. NATO is not dead, and would be far from impotent in major war. It is not fully engaged in Afghanistan because most of its members do not believe the fight to be in their Vital National Interest.

Unity of Command?

We have let down our soldiers and marines in many ways, not least in that we have lacked the two text book requirements for winning an insurgency – Unity of Command and Unity of Purpose. Who can tell me who, in the UK, is in charge of our war in southern Afghanistan? Consider this: the UK Brigadier is answerable to London, but under the NATO chain of command, while his in-theatre boss – a civil servant who used to work for DfID – sits in the office next door. The UK has far more people sitting in HQs and Administrations across the country than we have on the ground. Every six months the British brigade rotates. With each new brigade, institutional memory flies out of the country.

EQUIPMENT FAILURE

The British campaign has suffered from generally well-intentioned but short-lived Ministers too inexperienced to read the over-

‘keenness to please’ of ambitious senior officers (in the MOD, FCO and SIS) or dumb refusal to get on board on the part of the leadership at DfID. As a result, the most senior officers at the MOD have sometimes looked like politicians in uniform battling to make it look like business as usual when in truth things are extremely difficult for them. A brave face is put on things; “spin” is applied. Even basic things like equipment failures, obvious to the soldier on the ground, are somehow twisted. “Of course we spin it to you – they can’t have you going back to the House of Commons and scoring political points because I have told you the truth about what is going on” said one friend when I complained that the Defence Select Committee were often being sold a line.

Body Armour

The lack of big ticket items – helicopters, armoured vehicle fleets – has resulted in many deaths. At a lower level, the “Urgent Operational Requirements” programme has been a great success. The body armour and helmets worn by our troops are about the best there are: there are no points to score here, but there is one rather big one to be made. Well over 200 British families have lost sons and daughters; many hundreds more have seen their children return alive, but with life changing disabilities. Because the modern helmets and body armour are so good, the death toll is very much lower than it would otherwise be – masking the seriousness of our involvement from the British public.

Road Side Bombs

Two years ago the most senior Special Forces officer told me that we would be losing a lot more people to roadside bombs – “because we are winning, because they can’t defeat us on the battlefield”. That’s true at the tactical level, but the increase in the number of successfully detonated IEDs/roadside bombs is also an indication of our loss of support from the local

population, not of some sort of waypoint on our march to victory. If local people are on your side, they tend to tell you where the bombs have been planted. The more so when so many locals are also being killed and injured by IEDs. While the Taliban have increased the lethality of their devices this has been evolutionary with little crossover from elsewhere. But, of course, if you have plenty of helicopters, you don't need to drive so much – and your activity can be a lot less predictable.

Helicopters

The British Army learned a lesson in Northern Ireland, where one of its heliports was the busiest in the world: troops were pretty much banned from vehicle movement because of roadside bombs, Improvised Explosive Devices. The reason that a blinding flash of white light from such a bomb is the last thing that 80% of our dead soldiers in Helmand ever saw is because we have forgotten the lessons of South Armagh.

Here is what Colonel Rupert Thorneloe thought about that. He wrote this a month before his death (and that of Trooper Joshua Hammond) from a roadside bomb on 1 July 2009.

10. Aviation. I have tried to avoid griping about helicopters – we all know we haven't enough helicopters. This increases our exposure to bombs at the roadside... We cannot-not move people, so this month we have conducted a great deal of administrative movement by road. This increases the IED threat and our exposure to it. The current level of Support Helicopter support is therefore unsustainable.

Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, Weekly Update, 5 June 2009

Rupert Thorneloe's replacement wrote later:

3. Aviation has been erratic throughout this week.....This has forced us to

conduct more road moves than I would like..... I understand the strains in the fly program but any improvement would greatly assist.

Weekly Update, 10 July 2009

Two weeks later, the Prime Minister said (in the context of Operation Panther's Claw):

"In the operations we are having at the moment it is completely wrong to say that the loss of lives has been caused by the absence of helicopters."

Gordon Brown, Prime Minister's Press Conference, 22 July 2009

This is not an isolated incident. Another grieving father, Ian Sadler, has stated that his 21-year-old son Jack, of The Honourable Artillery Company, would still be alive if there had been more helicopters in Afghanistan. He was blown up during a two-day resupply convoy in 2007.

"The Chinook could have completed this task in four 15 minute sorties and my son would still be alive. I'm livid about this and have been aware of the MoD's lack of support for our soldiers for some time."

There may be a solution. Since 2006, a number of private companies, with varying levels of credibility, have offered a remedy. For example, at a meeting on 8 September 2009 in the MoD, a company claimed to the top brass that it could provide twelve MI-17 helicopters, and twelve smaller Bell 412s, as well as one gigantic MI-26. Former RAF pilots would operate the aircraft "hot and high", would have night vision, be fully weaponised and equipped with defensive aids. It was a complete "turn-key" solution – logistics, engineering support, everything – and a factory in Nottinghamshire was ready to prepare most of the aircraft by Christmas. While they would cost around £7 million a month (just over twice the cost of monthly housing benefit payments in my constituency), they would have taken the

pressure off the Chinook fleet and reduced the unnecessary road moves that are exposing our troops to roadside bombs. Apparently the Army was “supportive”. But the flaw was said to be RAF honour. If the RAF can't provide the number of helicopters that the boys on the ground say they need, then should we not urgently and creatively grip the situation?

DOOM AND GLOOM?

On the plus side, most of the non-Pashtun parts of the country are at relative peace (though this may be changing with recent violence against German troops), and, yes, large numbers of girls are going to school. Loya Jirgas, the traditional mass tribal councils, have been held. The “National Solidarity Programme” in rural areas has given local people in 2,000 plus villages a real stake in development that many have been prepared to protect. But even in the north and west the many relatively small Pashtun communities planted after 1880 by the first Emir, on strategically useful bits of ground, are growing restless.

Much of what is touted as success is in fact the imposition of alien ideas on a country that already has its own rules and way of life. There is a Constitution, and a Government in Kabul that claims for itself the right to govern the whole country. There have been elections where Pashtun turnout was low and fraud massive. Police, intelligence, and army institutions dominated by minority northerners attempt to impose their will.

There are some competent chiefs, like the remarkable Amrullah Saleh of the National Directorate of Security. But like many who control the Kabul Government he is a Northern Alliance commander, encouraged to work on a model of central and bureaucratic rule that is alien to most of the people of the country.

Insecurity

Some time ago I attended an official briefing from a four star British officer. His presentation to the Defence Select Committee was suitably upbeat. A while later I saw him privately, and kicked off light-heartedly by asking if we were still winning. His response? “If we f*****g are, it won't be in my lifetime”. He is still alive.

Provinces around Kabul – certainly at night – are controlled by the Taliban. They are getting large car and truck bombs into supposedly secure areas of the capital. The major roads in the country are also dominated by the Taliban: ask any Afghan whether or not it is a good idea to drive from Kabul to Kandahar. Most NATO supply lines only stay open because the local transport companies pay our taxpayers money to “local security companies” along the routes. This means the Taliban. So we are paying them many millions of dollars a year for them to allow us to supply our forces in order to fight them. There are no longer any secure supply lines.

Drugs

Some of the Taliban's cash comes from opium – most of it indirectly from taxes on opium growers. Narcotics have become inherent in Afghan society and have corrupted all levels of government. Of course this must be tackled, and there have been excellent efforts to destroy laboratories, interdict exports and restrict pre-cursor chemicals. But for now we can either fight the growing insurgency or deal with the drugs — you can't do both at the same time if you want to maintain the consent of the civilian population. In any case, this problem is all about demand: you will only reduce supply if you provide alternative livelihoods — yet another area where we are long on Power Point, short on delivery.

MCCHRYSTAL CLEAR AIMS

General Stanley McChrystal and retired British General Graeme Lamb are remarkable men. The key element of the new strategy seems to be an increased emphasis on protecting the people of Afghanistan, gaining their confidence by providing them with security against the Taliban. More troops would “clear” areas of insurgents, while the increase would mean we could more effectively “hold” areas: key to this is the acceleration of the training and deployment of Afghan security forces, as this would eventually become their responsibility. An aid surge would then provide the “build” component, increasing the confidence of local people in their Government. The Government will also be put under intense pressure to root out corruption. There is also the suggestion of an increased willingness to make deals with local Taliban, though it is unclear how far up the insurgency the US is prepared to go, given that the narrative up to now has been that the Taliban leadership and AQ are virtually the same thing.

Most of this is not new – it is what we were meant to be doing all along. But this time, we are told, that we will do this rather better. It still sounds good, but reaffirms top-down Nation Building where we are to impose the will of a remote Government in Kabul over fiercely independent Pashtuns.

For example, our “Exit Strategy” involves the Afghan National Army. This is intended to bring stability to Pashtun areas – but it won’t have many Pashtuns in it. So it will be seen as yet another outside army, albeit a Muslim one. Traditionally for Pashtuns it is unmanly to join armies. Both the first Emir and Nadir Khan, the father of King Sahir Shah, exempted many tribes from military service for this reason. So to see one of the Golden Bullets of the new strategy as building up “Afghan Security Capacity”, misses the point: in the

Pashtuns areas you have to rely on motivating local people to set up their own militias.

This is another example of the way our plans sound plausible, but are in reality over-ambitious and work against the grain of local society. It looks great on paper. But the idea that after a few weeks of training you will have a competent soldier loyal to an Afghan state is risible – as is the reality that the accelerated army recruitment will result in an army mainly officered and manned by Tajiks who do not reflect the country, still less its Pashtun areas.

Costs of Afghan War

Our action in Afghanistan has now cost the UK more than £12 billion. It is hard to estimate the full future social costs to the country. The economist Joseph Stiglitz assesses that when these long-term costs are factored in the total drain on the UK’s resources will be much higher.

The US figures are even more staggering. The Cato Institute reports evidence that every additional 1,000 US troops in Afghanistan would cost about \$1 billion a year. Stiglitz calculates that the total cost to the US of its actions in Iraq and Afghanistan will top \$3 trillion when you include interest payments. This figure dwarfs the recent bailout of Wall Street and the Economic Stimulus Bill. In comparison with the costs of this failing war, saving the Capitalist System was a cut-price bargain.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We can not allow a propaganda victory. This would be a defeat for the West, but also more importantly for real moderate, secular and democratic Muslims.

A reduction of forces might lead to a prolonged period of civil war (such as when the Soviets left the country). A militant Islamic Government might then be set up in all or parts of the country. This might allow the re-

establishment of an AQ or similar terrorist network, and with it, the capability to train for, and to plan, global terrorist activity in a secure environment. Finally, the re-emergence of that sort of Government might have a great impact on efforts to quell the insurgency in Pakistan.

These are possibilities, though nowhere near as likely as the official narrative implies. What is certain is that if we stay in Afghanistan achieving worse than nothing, we will be defeated. The outcome really depends on whether or not you think things will get better or worse from here if we continue the current strategy. So it is worth examining each of these justifications to see if there really is no alternative.

Would NATO withdrawal lead to civil war?

When the Soviets left, they left completely. Civil war broke out. However, the risk of civil war could be minimised if troop numbers and support were merely reduced. Try having a civil war when local politics are influenced by political officers – armed with cash, as well as the US intelligence and surveillance assets, the US air-force, US/UK Tier 1 Special Forces, all backed up by some well funded Afghan security and intelligence capacity, (and possibly help from other countries in the region).

Would a militant Islamist Government come to power?

Improbable as long as some viable support were maintained. And we are back to the false dichotomy: the Taliban are from the Pashtun minority, with little influence outside their tribal areas. Most of the Pashtun and the whole of the rest of the country want nothing to do with them. It seems unlikely that they could ever form another government – even if the international community completely disengaged.

Would AQ (or similar) re-establish itself?

There are very close ties of marriage between leading figures in the Taliban leadership and AQ,

but the Quetta Shura (most of the old Taliban leadership) are said to have acknowledged that hosting AQ was a disaster for them – as that is what caused their ejection from power. Taliban resurgence, if at all, would be in specific local areas in the Pashtun south and east. Do we need 100,000-plus western troops to prevent that? Whatever happens, there will always be some level of insurgency – but there is such a thing as an “acceptable” level of violence.

ESSENTIAL POLICIES

It is essential to deny Afghan territory as a launching pad for attacks on other countries. This will involve:

1. Strike

We must maintain a framework on the ground and assets in the country to find, fix and strike anyone presenting an international threat. We are good at hitting targets from a very long way away. We dominate the electronic spectrum. “And you could run a pretty decent human intelligence setup out of anywhere else by calling Afghan sources on their mobile phones, as long as you had a well-resourced local partner, and help in handing out the almighty dollar in return”.

2. Pakistan

We will keep going backwards until we understand the legitimate concerns at the heart of Pakistan’s security Establishment. We also need to be more discrete in our assistance to them, to give them night vision, to get them to do the drone attacks – to persuade their military that they are there to help and protect their people, as well as defend the state.

3. Reconciliation

We must strike a political deal with as many of the insurgents that are prepared to come on board, and back up deals with a financially and presentationally generous reconciliation

programme. This will be well short of a grand bargain. But pursued systematically by an Afghan Government and international partners, and encompassing multiple local fixes with local groups and tribes and sub-tribes, it will help take the sting out of the insurgency. Recent reports that the senior leadership feel they are winning will make this more difficult. These reports make this process more urgent.

DESIRABLE POLICIES

It would be far better to work with, not against, the grain of Afghan society. This will involve:

4. Honest, technocratic National Government

There must be a central Government in Afghanistan that has at least the respect or toleration of somewhere near a majority of Afghans, whose communities they deal with using the lightest touch. Afghanistan has never had a tradition of government that served the people: the corruption should therefore be no surprise. Perhaps by forcing a Government of National Unity, President Karzai can have his hands taken off the levers of the executive, leaving others to roll back the control of the drug mafia over government.

Whatever the government, they must be seen to be the ones in charge – not puppets of the US. It must do the spending, make the deals, conduct the military operations – and not kid themselves that they are going to control and administer every bit of Afghan territory.

We cannot keep bailing the government out. They need to feel some of the heat.

5. Build-up Existing Local Structures

Kabul does not and will never extend its writ across the whole country. Though battered by war the Tribal structures still exist. They can be used and should be supported. Bottom-up is better than top-down.

6. Support Indigenous Security Structures

We could also provide “strategic over-watch” in the event of groups organizing against all forms of patriotic Afghan governance. They could support local village structures right up to Kabul. NATO regular forces might mentor government forces in protecting major towns and development. Special Forces might work in their more traditional role – supporting militias, gathering intelligence and supporting reconciliation efforts in the countryside.

You do not need many tens of thousands of foreigners inside the country to achieve this. One major problem today is of large groups of foreign combat troops rampaging through rural areas, often with nothing more than a Tajik interpreter. Further, an Afghan National Army made up of mostly northern Tajiks is a foreign army to Pashtuns. You do need a couple of tens of thousands of men to secure bases for development activity, to train local tribal militias, and to support some central government military and intelligence activity. District General hospitals might be attached onto the sides of the bases of international forces: this would have enormous effect.

Apart from top-down nation building, the fatal flaw of General McChrystal's strategy is the idea that “Afghan National Security Forces” will somehow bring order to the Pashtun areas. They won't. They'll be seen as outside occupiers.

7. Local Security Structures

Local security structures are more realistic than imagining security through a strong Afghan state. Historically the country has shown it has no difficulty generating large numbers of armed men. Part of the programme of local deals must include local security structures – for example, the village Arbaki self-defence forces. Our talk of an army of hundreds of thousands of men, costing 500% of current GDP suggests an army of occupation of an authoritarian state, funded by

us, that wants to hunt down its enemy rather than reconcile with them out of necessity. Do we create an enemy, and then create an army to fight them?

8. Development

The biggest losers in this whole debacle have been the Afghan people. We invaded a desperately poor country, spent billions of dollars on war fighting, enriched its élite who mainly exported the money – and left nothing for the ordinary people. We must reinforce areas and groups at peace and be pragmatic about using aid as part of the armoury.

CONCLUSION

We should focus on what we can actually achieve, not what we think would be rather nice to achieve. There is always going to be some level of insurgency in Afghanistan, but we need to manage it, not fuel it.

We should not reinforce failure. Instead, we should have a long look at why we are failing.

There are no easy answers: there is no package of perfect solutions. But the way forward lies more in working with the grain of Afghan society, than in sending more troops to work against it. The last thing we needed is more “Big Army”. President Obama seems to understand this, but we will have to wait and see what he decides.

Maintaining our partnership with the US is vital to the UK’s national security. Protecting our population from terror attacks is our first duty: picking fights with tribesmen in southern Afghanistan is not.

“A strange moral blindness clouded the vision of our statesmen: they saw only the natural, the inevitable results of their own measures, and forgot that those measures were the dragon’s teeth from which sprang-up armed men.”

John Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, 1851*

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